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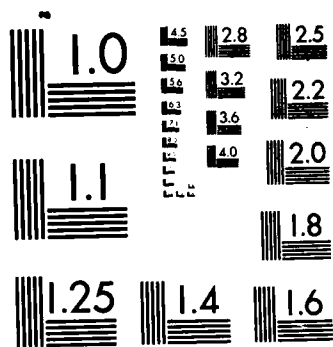
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NARROWING UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE MARITIME STRATEGY

by

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Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

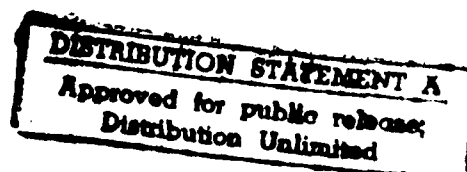
A paper submitted to the Dean of Academics of the Naval War College for consideration in the Past Presidents Award Prize Essay Contest.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Nine uncertainties about the current U.S. Maritime Strategy are examined in this essay. The perspective taken is strategic rather than operational or tactical. Several of the uncertainties about the strategy are found to be troublesome, but potential solutions can be identified. It is concluded that the Maritime Strategy has many potential strengths, and can be enhanced to reduce uncertainty. The top priority recommended for consideration is the forward deployment of additional U.S. naval forces to Western Europe for the purpose of increasing peacetime operations in the area of NATO's Northern Flank.



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NARROWING UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE MARITIME STRATEGY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

War is the realm of uncertainty; three-quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty.

Carl von Clausewitz, On War¹

The current U.S. Maritime Strategy for war initiated by the Soviet Union calls for strong forward defenses and counteroffensives by the Navy and Marine Corps, with the support of allies and other U.S. armed services. Vulnerable allied flanks in Europe and the Western Pacific are to be reinforced early--before the shooting starts, if possible. With the opening of armed hostilities, U.S. and allied naval and supporting forces will seize the initiative, sinking Soviet ships and submarines in their operating areas, destroying Soviet naval bases and airfields, and then intervening directly in the land battle on NATO's Central Front, in Korea, or elsewhere as needed. The strategy is designed to reinforce and take advantage of the Soviet Navy's apparent intentions to concentrate most forces in peripheral seas to protect its ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and defend the Soviet homeland.²

Many uncertainties plague the Maritime Strategy, however. An unclassified Navy summary of the strategy in April 1984 acknowledged these uncertainties:

1. Soviet unpredictability;
2. Warning and reaction time before hostilities;
3. Readiness, sustainability, and attrition of U.S. forces;

4. Readiness of Navy and Marine Corps personnel;
5. Impact of tactical nuclear warfare at sea;
6. Possible actions of Soviet allies, friends, and surrogates; and
7. Roles of neutrals and nations friendly to U.S.³

At least two more uncertainties must be added, in that they are cited often by commentators inside and outside the naval service:

8. Reliability of contributions by U.S. allies.⁴
9. Deterrent₅ versus provocative nature of the Maritime Strategy.

Together, these uncertainties create serious doubts about the Maritime Strategy. There are vocal critics among retired Navy officers, member of previous Presidential administrations, journalists, and naval "experts." Much more troubling, the uncertainties lead to skepticism among active-duty naval officers and their colleagues in the Army and Air Force.

Criticism and skepticism about the Maritime Strategy, in turn, can erode public confidence and Congressional support. Potentially, misgivings also could delay the cooperation of allies in executing the strategy and limit the willingness of U.S. National Command Authorities to direct its timely implementation in reaction to warning. Hence, uncertainties are compounded.

Clausewitz noted that, while chance and some unknowns are unavoidable in strategy and war, careful study can be applied to minimize uncertainties. This essay examines the major uncertainties about the Maritime Strategy and suggests how they can be reduced in impact. The focus throughout will be near-term and strategic, rather than operational or tactical, in perspective.

CHAPTER II

ANALYZING THE UNCERTAINTIES

Each uncertainty about the Maritime Strategy can be assessed and tested for impact on the strategy's suitability, feasibility, and acceptability.* When the strategy seems to be "sensitive" to a particular uncertainty, a way to eliminate or reduce that uncertainty must be explored.

Soviet Unpredictability. Suppose the Soviet Navy does not remain in peripheral seas, but sorties to the open-ocean or to key regions of the world before hostilities commence. This is a capability of the modern Soviet Navy and, as the Soviet Union acquires more political and economic links overseas, the intention to deploy additional naval forces in this way is more likely. Also, to the extent Soviet leaders believe that their SSBNs are less vulnerable due to quieting, sanctuaries, or under-ice tactics, Soviet attack submarines (SSNs) can be freed in greater numbers to strike U.S. and allied open-ocean shipping. Hence, there is some uncertainty about Soviet Navy wartime missions and operating areas.¹

The Maritime Strategy would be sensitive to this uncertainty and less suitable as a strategy if U.S. naval forces prepare for the wrong missions and mal-deploy in the opening phases of hostilities. Sensitivity is reduced as long as the Navy and Marine

*A suitable strategy promises to accomplish military objectives supporting national policy and interests. If feasible, it can be executed with the forces, technology, and support available in the face of enemy opposition and other obstacles. If acceptable, the strategy promises results worth the estimated costs, with a reasonable degree of risk.

Corps continue to prepare for a variety of scenarios, including but not limited to those envisioned in the Maritime Strategy. Close observation of the Soviet Navy and other forces in crisis periods can alert U.S. commanders and national leaders to needs for modifying the execution of the strategy.

Also, in an important way, the Maritime Strategy itself can reduce Soviet unpredictability by reinforcing the perceived threats to Soviet flanks and SSBNs. This compels Soviet leaders to continue assigning two-thirds of general purpose forces to the priorities of homeland defense and SSBN "combat stability" missions in peripheral seas--limiting the Soviet Navy's flexibility to undertake other wartime roles or aggressive ventures far from home waters.

Warning and Reaction Time. Ample warning and response time are far from certain, in spite of modern techniques for collecting indications and warning (I&W) data. There is ample evidence that Soviet military leaders will try to limit U.S. and allied warning and reaction time, promoting surprise through secrecy, deception, initiative, and timing.² The factor most likely to limit response time is indecision on the part of U.S. and allied political leaders, who naturally are reluctant to risk the financial, diplomatic, and domestic political costs of mobilizing for war.

The Maritime Strategy is especially sensitive to short warning and response time in the area of NATO's Northern Flank because U.S. naval forces are not deployed there routinely. This calls into question the feasibility of plans to reinforce northern Norway with a Marine brigade and to control the Norwegian Sea with

aircraft carrier battle groups (CVBGs). The negative impact of uncertain warning and response time would be less, and the efficacy of the Maritime Strategy enhanced, if forces committed to the area were in place or nearly in peacetime.

Readiness, Sustainability, and Attrition of U.S. Forces.

Some critics expect high attrition to cripple the Maritime Strategy.³ However, these predictions often rely on questionable assumptions about scenarios and weapons effectiveness, while ignoring new weapons systems such as the sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM). In fact, attrition largely will be a function of readiness and sustainability, areas in which weaknesses are acknowledged by Maritime Strategy proponents and critics alike. Commanders of NATO and U.S. unified commands, for example, are concerned about shortages of ammunition, spare parts, and consumables.⁴ They are more confident about readiness, but others cite deficiencies in some specific areas such as Arctic submarine operations⁵ and cold weather expertise in the Marine Corps.⁶

Shortcomings in readiness and sustainability cast doubt on the feasibility of the Maritime Strategy. Effective training, exercises, and operations can improve readiness and reduce that uncertainty. Also needed is a continued emphasis on full funding for programs supporting readiness and sustainability. Similarly, building and maintaining adequate force levels can help to offset expected attrition.

Readiness, sustainability, and adequate force levels all require tax dollars, and the U.S. military budget process may be the greatest additional uncertainty affecting the Maritime

Strategy. If other uncertainties about the strategy are narrowed, however, the Administration, Congress, and public-opinion leaders will be more inclined to provide the necessary resources.

Readiness of Navy and Marine Corps Personnel. Force readiness and sustainability are linked closely to Navy and Marine Corps personnel readiness. A lack of enough well-trained, highly motivated sailors and Marines would undermine the feasibility of the Maritime Strategy. To some extent, uncertainty about personnel readiness can be reduced through continued emphasis on "people programs" in the military budget and in leadership of the services. However, another element of personnel readiness also must be reinforced: The men and women who will execute the Maritime Strategy need confidence, based on knowledge of their missions and the proven ability to execute them. Hence, effective internal information programs and regular, realistic training are required, along with a Maritime Strategy less burdened by other uncertainties that cause skepticism among naval personnel.

Impact of Tactical Nuclear Warfare (TNW) at Sea. Soviet employment of nuclear weapons would increase attrition of U.S. and allied naval forces, potentially negating the feasibility and acceptability of any strategy. The likelihood of TNW is uncertain, however.

Logically, the Soviet Union has little to gain by initiating TNW at sea. Russian leaders know that this probably would lead to U.S. and allied use of tactical nuclear arms ashore, where the Soviet Union generally enjoys a distinct advantage in conventional firepower. A more likely scenario would be NATO first-use of TNW

when the alliance's conventional forces have failed to blunt a Warsaw Pact offensive. This option is part of NATO's strategy of flexible response.⁷ NATO use of nuclear weapons on the Central Front would encourage the Soviet Union to retaliate in kind, in the land battle and at sea.

If the Maritime Strategy can help to contain Soviet-Warsaw Pact conventional attacks early, the strategy can reduce the likelihood that NATO is forced to escalate to nuclear weapons.

Possible Actions of Soviet Allies Friends, and Surrogates.

The exercise OKEAN 1983 saw Soviet reconnaissance and combat aircraft deploy to Cuba, Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Vietnam, Libya, and Syria. However, it is not clear whether such deployments are rehearsals for wartime, or demonstrations designed primarily to increase Soviet Navy prestige and to erode U.S. and allied confidence in the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs).⁸ A second unknown is whether Warsaw Pact allies will remain loyal to the Soviet Union during a major conflict with NATO.

These are uncertainties which could affect the suitability and feasibility of the Maritime Strategy. However, the strategy can hedge against possible hostile actions by Cuba, Libya, and Vietnam, and others by planning contingency reactions, with the support of U.S. allies and other U.S. regular and reserve forces. In time of crisis and war, such contingency plans can be the "muscle" behind intense U.S. diplomatic efforts to promote the strict neutrality of Soviet friends. Another deterrent to hostile action by Soviet friends--and the real key to encouraging the

defection of Soviet allies--is a strategy perceived to be capable of defeating the Soviet Union. No one wants to be on the losing side, if it can be avoided. Therefore, in peacetime as well as in the early phases of war, much can be gained if U.S. naval forces demonstrate the counteroffensive capability and resolve embodied in the Maritime Strategy.

Roles of Neutrals and Nations Friendly to the U.S. If the Soviet Union violates Finnish and Swedish neutrality to assault northern Norway, an armed reaction by the Finns and Swedes could tie down and attrite significant numbers of Soviet forces. Such decisions by nations to enforce neutrality or to ally with the U.S. could support the execution of the Maritime Strategy. At the same time, the strategy can be a means to encourage those decisions through demonstrated capability and resolve. For example, regular peacetime rehearsal of the Maritime Strategy can turn around growing Scandanavian perceptions that the Soviet Navy has established dominance in the Norwegian and Baltic seas.⁹ Such perceptions otherwise could sway decisions on neutrality in the direction of the Soviet Union.

Reliability of Contributions by U.S. Allies. The military contributions of allies could be uncertain for several reasons. For example, domestic politics and a culture favoring neutralism could lead Iceland to disengage from NATO in a serious crisis.¹⁰ NATO in general could be immobilized at a crucial time because of the difficulty of reaching a consensus among members. On the other side of the world, Japan might be reluctant to prepare for war, considering the proximity of Soviet military power.

The Maritime Strategy is designed to support U.S. allies, but the strategy also depends on them for its implementation. Without the cooperation of Iceland, Norway, Japan, and others, the feasibility of the strategy is doubtful.

The forward presence and demonstrated capabilities of U.S. naval forces can do much to sustain allied trust. Bilateral and multi-national maritime exercises and professional discussions also contribute to coalition solidarity. The Maritime Strategy can be a vehicle for expressing U.S. commitment, as well as a basis for military cooperation.

Deterrence or Provocation. Perhaps the most serious uncertainty sometimes linked to the Maritime Strategy is that it may lead to unwanted escalation. One concern is vertical escalation. For example, successful attacks on Soviet SSBN's in their northern bastions may prompt Soviet leaders to launch the remaining submarine ballistic missiles (SLBMs) before they are lost.¹¹ Likewise, U.S. aircraft carriers approaching the Soviet Union may be perceived as nuclear strike platforms, compelling Soviet leaders to order a preemptive nuclear attack.¹² Another concern is that the strategy will lead the Soviet Union to counter with horizontal escalation, perhaps in a new region where the U.S. is ill-prepared to fight.¹³

Even if these concerns are baseless, any uncertainty about the potential of the Maritime Strategy to provoke the Soviet Union may cause U.S. National Command Authorities to delay or constrain execution of the strategy. Also, uncertainty could create dissension among U.S. allies. Hence, provocation concerns must be reduced

for the Maritime Strategy to be suitable, feasible, and acceptable for warfighting, and effective as a deterrent.

Concern over vertical escalation can be reduced if the destruction of Soviet SSBNs is planned and rehearsed, but implemented only in the event Soviet forces proceed to use the opening phase of a conventional war to strike U.S. and NATO nuclear weapons delivery systems and stockpiles, as present Soviet military strategy suggests. If Soviet leaders are convinced that their highly valued SSBN strategic reserve force is at risk, they may reject the conventional "war for nuclear advantage" and think again about initiating war at all. Moreover, to reinforce deterrence, the Maritime Strategy can remind Soviet leaders that strikes on NATO tactical nuclear arms ashore would not eliminate the retaliatory power of forward-deployed U.S. Navy weapons such as SLCMs with nuclear warheads.

The provocative aspect of U.S. aircraft carrier battle group (CVBG) operations in the Norwegian Sea, Sea of Japan, and other waters vital to U.S. and allied flanks can be reduced by more frequent operations there in peacetime. Once Soviet and U.S.-allied leaders become more accustomed to routine U.S. fleet presence, the positioning or reinforcement of naval forces in those areas during a crisis period will be less unusual and threatening. At the same time, deterrence will be strengthened by expressing U.S. resolve and challenging any aggressive move the Soviet Union may be considering.

The possibility of horizontal escalation is the remaining concern expressed about the Maritime Strategy. However, given the superior power projection capabilities of U.S. naval forces, the prospect of horizontal escalation to other flanks or regions creates greater uncertainty for the Soviet Union than for the United States. The U.S.S.R. has more coastline than any other nation--66,090 miles, and coastal security is an historic pre-occupation of Russian leaders.¹⁴ The Maritime Strategy can threaten amphibious assaults, attacks by carrier-based aircraft, and strikes by conventional-warhead SLCMs launched from submarines and surface combatants. These possibilities would be worrisome distractions for Soviet leaders contemplating war, denying them complete confidence in a favorable outcome.

As Mahan wrote, "The surest way to maintain peace is to occupy a position of menace."¹⁵ With its flexible potential for defense and counteroffensive, the Maritime Strategy can contribute much to deterrence, with a calculated risk of provocation.

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CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of uncertainties about the Maritime Strategy validates a number of the strategy's strong points, while suggesting ways in which it can be enhanced. Many uncertainties can be reduced by increasing U.S. Navy and Marine Corps operations in those areas critical to the successful execution of the strategy.

In particular, more operating experience and routine presence are called for in the Norwegian and North sea area. Achieving these ends could be difficult at a time when top Navy leaders are committed to reductions in fleet operating tempo. However, one reasonable force posture option is to begin alternating deployments of CVBGs to the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic, reinforcing the Sixth Fleet at times with a battleship-led surface action group. Another alternative is to reconsider home-porting a U.S. aircraft carrier in Western Europe, with Great Britain as the logical first choice of location. Certainly, consideration should be given to retaining Holy Loch, Scotland, as a forward base for U.S. SSNs, even after the site's SSBN support role ends with the retirement of Poseidon submarines.

Equally important is the need to position Marines closer to the areas they would reinforce for NATO. A forward-based Marine Amphibious Unit could prepare the way for a larger force when needed.

Forward deploying more of the leading forces for the Maritime Strategy in both the Atlantic and Pacific would -

- Reduce Soviet unpredictability by multiplying opportunities to observe Soviet fleet activities, and by reinforcing Soviet perceptions of U.S. capabilities to challenge northern sea bastions and the homeland.
- Lower U.S. dependence on warning and response time.
- Increase U.S. and multi-national training opportunities in areas and scenarios envisioned in the Maritime Strategy, stimulating force and personnel readiness and the development of tactics and systems suited to the strategy.
- Heighten the ability of U.S. naval forces to make an impact early in the event of Soviet aggression, providing counteroffensive options without resorting to tactical nuclear weapons.
- Renew the U.S. commitment to defend overseas allies and vital areas.
- Reduce the novel and possibly provocative nature of CVBG operation in forward areas.
- Strengthen deterrence by highlighting the flexible and potent warfighting capabilities incorporated in the Maritime Strategy.

Some lesser uncertainties about the Maritime Strategy may persist. But that, in itself, is no reason for rejecting a strategy so robust in potential. Returning to Clausewitz,

In war, as we have already pointed out, all action is aimed at probable rather than at certain success.... But we should not habitually prefer the course that involves the least uncertainty. That would be an enormous mistake.... There are times when the utmost daring is the height of wisdom.¹

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10. Fairlamb, p. 76.

11. Betts, p. 236.

12. Brooks, pp. 36-37.

13. Joshua M. Epstein, "Horizontal Escalation: Sour Notes of a Recurrent Theme," International Security, Winter 1983-1984, pp. 19-31.

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